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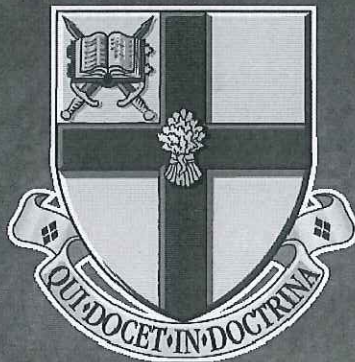
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University of
Chester

Law School

Responding to Expectation?

An Examination of Student Expectation and
Subsequent Experience of Undergraduate
Study

Dr Kathryn Dutton, Philip Hunter and Chris Broad

School of Law

The Research: An Introduction

- Two empirical research studies during the period 10/07 – present
- Funded by the Learning and Teaching Institute Small Grant Scheme

Study 1 (2007-2008) Responding to Expectation	Study 2 (2008-present): Expectation, Experience & the Conceptualisation of HE
<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ to further contemporary understandings of student expectations of, and motivation(s) for, undergraduate law study■ to examine the extent to which contemporary student experiences of undergraduate law study meet both their expectations and motivations	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ to further explore:<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ expectations of, and motivations for, undergraduate study;■ the importance of the 'expectation-reality' gap upon the student experience■ students self-conceptualisation as 'consumers'

Matters of Methodology

- EXPLORATORY studies focused on gathering rich and detailed data and improving (hitherto limited) understandings in the field
- Over-arching 'case-study' methodologies with the following key features:
 - Longitudinal
 - Tracking changes
 - Multi-site
 - Various participants including schools, access courses and C.U.
 - Multi-layered
 - Numerous tranches of data collection
 - Qualitative and quantitative methods used

The Research Context (1)

■ Why examine motivations for Undergraduate study?

- Motivation long-recognised as potentially important for a myriad of reasons, including:
 - Recruitment
 - Retention/ Progression
 - Performance
- Consensus surrounds the potential importance BUT specific impacts and effects remain elusive (Biggs, 1999)
- Motivation has particular pertinence for lawyers
 - Explaining the LLB
 - 'Vocational law student culture' (Twining, 1994) & academic criticism of 'dominant vocationalism' (Hunt, 1986: 292)
 - The 'Law Experiential' evaluation:

"[The main reason I chose to study law was]...to be a solicitor and live a comfortable life from an early age I was interested in this"

The Research Context (2)

■ Why examine expectations and experiences?

- Creating *holistic* understandings of the student experience requires context (Pawson and Tilley, 1997)
- The 'expectation-reality' gap and its potential importance – especially for lawyers (see, inter alia, Smith & Hopkins, 2005; Sam Banks, 1999)

■ Why examine 'consumerist-conceptualisations'?

- A theme of emerging importance:
 - "At £2000 a pupil...you need us – it had better be good!"
- Increasing pressures to improve and enhance 'the student experience'
 - The threats of increasing commodification and corporatization (eg Arthurs 2001)
 - How should we 'respond to expectation'?

Motivations for Undergraduate Study: Findings

■ Ideals vs Investment?

- For pre-undergraduates, the 2 most common 'motivations' to study at undergraduate level were:
 - Furtherance of knowledge
 - Career goals
- Furtherance of Knowledge: Liberal Ideal or A Vague Concept?
 - "...to further my knowledge"; "I want to increase my intelligence"
 - 'Education, Education, Education' ? (Blair, 2005)
- Career Goals: Consumer Investment?
 - "Better qualifications = better job"

Motivations for Specific Programmes: Findings

■ Interest vs Investment?

- Pre-undergraduate identified a range of different motivations for their *choice* of programme

Motivator	%
Subject Interest	90
Subject helpfulness in future career	88
Enjoyment of subject at A-level	64

Table details motivators identified in three site A-level student survey, conducted in 2007 (255 respondents)

- 'Subject helpfulness' in future career: THE **principal motivator**

Motivations for Law: Findings

■ **Pre-undergraduates: A slightly different pattern?**

- Slightly higher levels of 'law choosers' appeared to be motivated by 'interest' than 'investments'
- Struggles and the spectre of the superficial:
 - "...it is interesting..."; "...effects everyday life for everybody..."

■ **New-entry undergraduates: the pattern continues...**

- Most frequent motivators: subject interest and career goals
- The re-appearance of the superficial....
 - "It is different to other subjects because it is a different subject"
 - "The various topics and modules are all different making them unique"

Expectations of Higher Education

- **Uncovering unrealistic expectations**

- Example: expected activity distribution

Activity	Hrs p/w (mean)
Attending Lectures	11
Writing essays and reports	10
Reading	10
Participating in seminars/tutorials	7
Undertaking work experience	7
Conducting Internet Research	5
Conducting Library based research	5
Debating	4
Giving Presentations	4
Total	81

Table details data gathered from three site A-level student survey, conducted in 2007 (255 respondents)

Expectations of Higher Education

- **Unrealism as a *particular* problem for Law:**

- Induction week 2007, students estimated that they would spend 10% of their average week in 'practice-type' activity.

- **Sources of Information**

- Pre-undergraduates: websites, anecdotes and the prospectus
- New-entry: less anecdotes, more open days and career guidance

- **Mixed assessment of understanding**

- **Over-confidence:** "I feel like I have enough information"
- **Residual Uncertainty: Process not Practice**
- **Does it matter?** "I don't know that much about it...but I don't care" ...why is this?

Experiences in Context

■ Is there an 'expectation-reality gap'?

■ Mixed findings:

- L4: 81% surveyed and overwhelming majority of FG participants report 'fulfilment'
- L5 & 6 overwhelming majority of FG participants report reality very different to expectation:

"I came here expecting – law!...It's not what I expected...I would have liked more courtroom experience"

■ Explaining the anomalies:

- The lack of significant and/ or multiple challenges at level four
- The impact of motivation...
- The inherent difficulty of interpretation: participant recall

Experiences in Context (2)

■ **Motivation**

- A 'convenient fit' with expectation?
 - Career as motivator, shaping expectations
- Important, but inherently unstable: the chronological trajectory of change
 - L4: high levels of stability in motivation (81% of surveyed and FG participants)
 - Stability appears to sustain student engagements
 - L5: '...then I had a bit of a wobble...'
 - Initial motivation wanes, with impact!
 - L6: re-affirmation or rejection
 - Impacts on both engagement and reported experience

Emergent Themes/ Next Steps

- Motivation and expectation are critically important in understanding *all* aspects of the student experience
- There are complex inter-relationships between motivation, expectation and subsequent experience
- There is evidence of a significant 'expectation-reality' gap amongst pre-undergraduate students that needs to be addressed by all
 - Clarity of message may be crucial in 'narrowing' the gap
- Limited diversity in motivation AND the inter-relationships between motivation and expectation is a potentially toxic cocktail for transitions!
- There is a need for us *all* to explore how initial motivational needs can be better met and sustained within the curriculum BUT beware instability!
- Pursuing strategies of employer engagement *may* be helpful in sustaining motivation, but , again, instability needs to be considered